"Curious, if True":
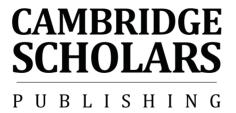# The Fantastic in Literature

"Curious, if True": The Fantastic in Literature

Edited by

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FOREWORD

My initial reaction to *"Curious, if True": The Fantastic in Literature* conference was a slow shake of the head in wonderment: here was the next generation of scholars getting together to discuss fantasy as if that were a completely normal activity; as if there were no need to be defensive about their choice of topic; no fear that their association with fantasy might damage their reputations as serious literary scholars. Everyone involved, as far as I could determine, was completely unapologetic.

This has not always been the case. Not so long ago, speculative fiction (by which I mean fantasy, science fiction, horror, and the like) was considered the lowest form of popular culture, unworthy of serious consideration. Indeed, my own Dean in the mid-1990s told me that he considered sci-fi a step below Harlequin Romance, and found my interest in the genre as embarrassing as if I were promoting pornography to my students. When I presented him with a copy of an original anthology of Canadian speculative fiction I had co-edited with Quebec author Yves Meynard, he had simply pushed the book back across his desk at me. "I don't have time to read that sort of rubbish," he announced. "The only popular literature I read these days are Booker Prize nominees." When I insisted that he shouldn't judge a book by its genre, he sighed deeply, reluctantly accepted the copy back, and opening it at random, read aloud: "'. . . placed the lunch tray in the microwave and nuked it.' See there! That's exactly what I'm talking about! 'Nuke' isn't even a proper word!" And with that he handed the collection back with finality, satisfied that his dismissal of the genre had now been fully vindicated.

He was hardly alone in his distain for SF. When I interviewed instructors teaching SF courses at various post-secondary institutions across Canada in the late 1990s, they were unanimous that fantasy and science fiction were seldom taken seriously by their colleagues. With few exceptions, these instructors held their academic positions based on their expertise in Shakespeare, or nineteenth-century poets, or whatever, and their passion for fantasy was regarded as no more relevant to their academic careers than if they had raised budgerigars. Every campus had at least one, and often two or three courses in SF, because such courses were wildly popular with students and brought much needed course registrations to the department; but these courses were seldom viewed as

appropriate options for the Department's own students. "My colleagues refer to the SF course as 'English for Engineers,'" one instructor told me, "because it's what the non-English majors take to fulfill their English course requirements. I get a scattering of English majors, but they're mostly looking for an easy 'A.'" Relatively few English majors saw fantasy or science fiction as appropriate topics for their degree.

To be fair, the prejudice against speculative fiction was not entirely unfounded. Modern SF has its origins in the pulp magazines of the 1930s and 40s, whose garish covers of tentacled-aliens threatening scantily-clad Earth women could hardly have presented a less respectable image of the genre. My older brother often reminisced about having to hide his copies of *Astounding* inside a copy of *Life Magazine* on the bus to avoid the disapproving stares or snide comments of fellow passengers. Nor were those early pulp stories exactly masterpieces of literary genius: when Hugo Gernsback founded *Amazing Stories* in 1926, his vision for *scientifiction* was to recruit young readers to the exciting field of electronics and the other emerging sciences; literary values—like, say, basic characterization—took a definite back seat in this new "literature of ideas." Pulp fantasy sometimes measured slightly higher on the literary scale, but often had even more distressingly Freudian covers.

Although speculative fiction quickly outgrew its pulp origins, the early stigma remained. The next generation may have grown up watching *Star Trek* and *Star Wars,* but media SF never really progressed beyond the SF of 1950s, reinforcing academia's impression of the genre as largely escapist junk. Fantasy at least had Tolkien, but scholars could be forgiven if they dismissed the rest of the fantasy shelves as endless derivative drivel. All too easy for the casual observer to miss the sea change represented by the genre's evolution from *The Fionavar Tapestry* (a typical Tolkienesque trilogy, partially set in Toronto) to *Tigana* (a stunning thought experiment on the significance of national identity).

But that's all finally changing. As the *Star Trek* generation has grown up to become the establishment, and popular culture has increasingly become a topic of legitimate scholarly interest, fantasy in all its forms has become an accepted part of the mainstream.

Just how much attitudes have shifted within a single generation may be seen in the academic career of CanLit great, Douglas Barbour. When he completed his Ph.D. at Queens in 1976, it was touch and go whether his committee could actually accept his dissertation on science fiction authors Delany, Le Guin, and Russ as a legitimate topic. For one thing, the committee had pestered him endlessly to define what exactly he meant by 'science fiction'; an exercise which today would be regarded as about as

meaningful as arguing over the status of angles on pins. In contrast, Barbour's last official act before retiring in 2005 was to sit as external reader for a dissertation on a graphic novel. No one, he told me, had even raised an eyebrow over granting a Ph.D. based on a literary analysis of a comic.

And so to the current proceedings: it is with considerable satisfaction that I am able to introduce to you the next generation of fantasy scholars; may they live long and prosper in a now more receptive academia.

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Robert Runte, Ph.D.
University of Lethbridge
March, 2012
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INTRODUCTION

AMY BRIGHT

It has been said that while true interdisciplinary work is productive and important, it is relatively rare. The combination of disciplines demands creativity, attention to competing ideologies, and the ability to discover meaning in a range of thought. Yet, this group of papers from English graduate students introduces the "fantastic in literature" as a way to seek broad perspectives and interconnections within the field of English. The collection therefore appears interdisciplinary, as it reaches across conventional literary periods and genres. Fantasy is used as an organizing topic, a genre that has always allowed for a broad interpretation of its meaning. From magic realism, to high fantasy, and the interpretations of realistic novels under a fantastic lens, this collection furthers the reach of fantasy in the study of English literature. Northrop Frye writes, "the world of literature is a world where there is no reality except that of the human imagination" (470) and this volume expands our vision of imagination as readers and scholars of English literature and beyond.

The collection itself arose from an English graduate student conference held at the University of Victoria in British Columbia in 2011. The conference invited M.A. and Ph.D. students from across North America to discuss the varied facets and permutations of the fantastic in literature and was designed to include presenters of both creative and academic works; as a result, several of the academic presenters also read from their creative writing. This focus on the fantastic in literature drew a wide arc of interest, spanning the Gothic and Romantic, the Victorian, Modern Literature, Contemporary, and Genre Fiction. The inclusion of such canonical novels as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Hound of the Baskervilles* alongside genre fiction fantasy/romance Laurell K. Hamilton's *Anita Blake: Vampire Hunter* series, points to the depth and breadth of this genre of literature. Additionally, the fluidity of the genre is highlighted by its reach—that a Romantic scholar can engage with the material of a Contemporary scholar in his/her scholarly career speaks to the collegiality across research interests that is encouraged at a conference such as this. Although this was an English graduate student conference, it highlighted interdisciplinary

links and aims that serve to extend English as a field, and make it more accepting of other modes of literature. Additionally, this collection helps researchers be more receptive to "what is possible" in the study of English and less fixated on "what is."

This collection of articles comes from the conference, and includes a wide range of topics for reading and research. Luke R. J. Maynard's detailed introduction to the evolution of fantasy, and its acceptance in academia, begins this collection. "'The Fickle Pensioners of Morpheus' Train': The Gothic Schism and the Roots of Fantasy" provides a discussion that guides the papers that follow (they range from the Romantic to the Contemporary, where Maynard focuses his survey). His article is concerned with the judgments rendered against the fantastic genre, and his survey of this history is filled with the vagaries of the evolution of fantasy. By addressing the Gothic Schism within the Gothic genre, Maynard shows how the aesthetic concerns surrounding the schism led to the development of fantastic literature as a category containing what are deemed "important" works alongside genre fiction.

In the next paper, Gaelan Gilbert addresses the infrequently spoken of "fantastic elements" of Dante's *Commedia*. The fantastic elements, however, are tempered with Dante's encounters with God's fantastic art in *Purgatorio* X and XII, as instances of aesthetic exemplarity that assist in Dante's moral development. The fantastic and the moral combine in Gilbert's paper, as he shows how the *Commedia* invites its readers to apply fantastic experiences to themselves, discovering commonalities and likenesses which assist in their own *habitus* of repentance and self-revision.

Mary Eileen Wennekers' "Genre, Non-correspondency and the Fantastic Real in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*" closely examines the precarious definition of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle as a strictly detective fiction writer. The paper discusses genre and category through a theoretical lens before closely examining the aspects of *The Hound of the Baskervilles* that make its genre difficult to define.

Elisa Bursten examines an important and seminal fantasy text—*The Hobbit* by J.R.R. Tolkien—in "'The Love of Beautiful Things': Norse Mythology and Greed in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*." She situates the story of Bilbo Baggins within the larger contexts of Norse mythology and the heroic epic *Beowulf* to deconstruct Tolkien's representation of greed—in both dwarves and dragons.

"'A Game of Worlds': Crossing Mythologies in Michael Chabon's *Summerland*" by Amy Bright examines contemporary fantasy for adolescents and teenagers, and shows how mythology replicates patterns of

adolescent experience. The paper demonstrates how fantasy enacts its own structural pattern, one that is present in the geography and location, mythology, and experiences of the adolescent characters. The game of baseball features primarily as an organizing factor, one that Chabon shows to be fruitful for unraveling an American mythology in this novel. Bright shows that being versed in the repetition of story allows the adolescent protagonists of *Summerland* to identify and use structure to make meaning of personal experience.

Next, Max F. R. Olesen's "Ambiguous Gods: Mythology, Immigration and Assimilation in Neil Gaiman's *American Gods* (2001) and 'The Monarch of the Glen' (2004)" similarly uses mythology as an indicator of the fantastic in literature. Using two texts by Neil Gaiman (who is himself a proponent and writer of fantasy and genre fiction), Olesen shows how disparate and culturally-specific mythologies come into contact with one another in contemporary North America. A close reading of *American Gods* and "The Monarch of the Glen" reveals a preoccupation with the history and mythology of America, as well as stories of immigration and movement across continents.

Laura van Dyke focuses on a particular aspect of the fantastical through the mythic figure of Melusine, the mermaid-like serpent woman at the heart of A.S. Byatt's *Possession*. van Dyke's "'Self-contained and singing to itself': Reading the Fairy Melusine in A.S. Byatt's *Possession*" examines Byatt's novel through the lens of this mythic figure, tracing her importance throughout. Pairing Byatt's writing with her critical work shows intention in her writing, and lends a focus on fairy tales and mythic stories.

The contemporary fantasy genre is examined in Erin Dunbar's "The Ugly Fantasy: The Disfigured Vampire as a Model of the Contemporary Bisexual." Her close reading of Laurell K. Hamilton's *Anita Blake: Vampire Hunter* series positions depictions of vampires in literature from the Gothic to Contemporary literature. The popularity of genre fiction calls for an examination of this category, and in particular, how bisexuality has shaped contemporary depictions of vampires (represented in this series through the character of Asher). Dunbar shows that Hamilton's writing challenges the reader "to view extreme versions of the 'other,' and even find them arousing."

Magic realism is examined as a component of fantasy in Tessa Mellas' "Disease in the Land of the Magically Real: The Illness Narrative Transposed." She includes close readings of three magical realist texts: Julia Slavin's "Dentaphilia," Judy Budnitz's "Skin Care," and Stacey

Richter's "The Land of Pain." Mellas shows how the illness narrative uses metaphor to transform sickness into something fantastical.

Similarly, Shannon M. Minifie's "'At a slight angle to reality': Postmodernism, Postcolonialism, and Salman Rushdie's Magic Realism," examines the role of magic realism in the larger category of fantasy. Her reading of Rushdie's *Shame* is preoccupied with those examples from the book that are in themselves fantastical, and demonstrates how magic realism is a vehicle for both postmodernism and postcolonialism.

Casey Stepaniuk's foray into the fantastical is through science fiction. "'*That things could be different*': Feminist, Queer, and Science Fiction Politics in Samuel R. Delany's *Trouble in Triton*" envisions a speculative world, Triton, a non-hierarchal and flexible gender role society. Protagonist Bron encounters strictly fantastical situations that cause him to reexamine his conceptions of gender, sex, and binary constructions.

Finally, Thomas Stuart's paper "Recurring Dreams: Haunting Fantasy in John Fowles' *The Magnus*" offers a critical response to the novel and insists that the fantastical aspects presented should not be unraveled in the search for a simple conclusion. A focus on the fantasy delves into Fowles' writing, and shows the fantastic to be a component necessary to understanding the real.

This unique collection of papers shows the wide reach of fantasy in the study of English Literature in recent years. The authors value tradition in their reading and their writing but are not afraid to reach across genre borders to show their understanding of "the fantastic in literature." The ideas presented span years and literary periods, texts and genres, and show the undeniable value of interdisciplinary study to expand perspectives in the field of English.

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"THE FICKLE PENSIONERS OF MORPHEUS' TRAIN": THE GOTHIC SCHISM AND THE ROOTS OF FANTASY

LUKE R. J. MAYNARD

The Gothics and the Gothic Genre

Once upon a time (for that is how many of our best stories start), articles and collections of this sort would necessarily open with an impassioned defense, an "apologie" in the old sense, for seriously studying fantasy literature at all. Those days are now mercifully past: a shift in the cultural politics of literary criticism, modestly marked by this volume's appearance, is underscored by its emergence not into a critical vacuum, but into a growing chorus of outstanding texts on the fantastic. Where once such studies demanded lengthy, half-embarrassed introductions establishing their own scholarly relevance, they now enjoy, as studies of Shakespeare and Milton have long enjoyed, the luxury of a presumed importance.

It is easy to forget that this luxury has been hard-earned, that this happy climate for critics of the fantastic is, by the standards of literary study, a recent invention. There has always been, and still continues to be, a disjunctive relationship between the percentage of shelf space devoted to fantasy literature in bookstores and the percentage of ink spilt on the subject of fantasy within academia. I am not suggesting that this disproportion deserves or warrants remedy (at least, no more remedy than it has now been given): by its very nature, modern fantasy and other examples of what we have come to problematically call "genre fiction" are literatures of repetition—and repetition is, naturally, more kindly received in fiction than in criticism. But the artistic merits of individual works notwithstanding, I am concerned here with the judgments rendered against the fantastic genre as a whole, which have a long and interesting history unto themselves.

At a time when academic studies of "genre fiction" are being accorded a new legitimacy, I think it worthwhile to look back at the development of fantasy literature, and at the development of an aesthetics which dismissed it out of hand—not simply to argue that such dismissive attitudes were wrong, but rather, to better understand how and why such attitudes came to be. Along the way, I would prefer to remain neutral on the sticky matter of literary merit, especially where lines of genre cross. We may suppose and argue, for instance, that Stephenie Meyer is a "worse" writer than Jane Austen in ways that are practically empirical; but even so, there are counter-examples and gray areas: is she also somehow "worse" than Samuel Richardson, whose moralizing "conduct novels" for young women share many traits with the *Twilight* saga, and suffered many of the same criticisms? Such a road of judgment may be a useful aesthetic exercise, but it offers only the narrowest explanation (or no explanation at all) as to exactly why literatures of the fantastic have been isolated from institutionalized literary study until very recently. Instead, I'm more interested in the history of such judgmental aesthetics, starting with the critical backlash against the Gothic genre of the late eighteenth century, from which I'm going to suggest that dismissive criticism of the fantastic descends.

I should clarify before going on that I'm wary of using the term "Gothic genre" here: it's fallen out of fashion somewhat to talk of "the Gothic genre," perhaps because the word "Gothic" can refer to, and confuse, so many different aspects of literature. In *Romanticism and Gothic*, Michael Gamer observes that

> [w]e no longer . . . describe gothic exclusively as a genre; recent studies have represented it variously as an aesthetic (Miles), as a great repressed of romanticism (Bruhm and William Patrick Day), as a poetics (Williams), as a narrative technique (Halberstam and Punter), or as an expression of changing or "extreme" psychological or socio-political consciousness. (Bruhm, Cox, Halberstam, Monleón, Paulson, Richter, Williams 28)

Of all these Gothics, we now write about Gothic as genre the least frequently because a definition based in genre lacks the flexibility of a definition based in aesthetic or narrative technique. For instance, we can easily adapt some forms of Gothicness (aesthetic, mood, narrative technique, and so on) to modern texts: *Batman* comic books, Tim Burton films, and an enormous range of fiction (Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Lovecraft's *C'thulhu* mythos, Anne Rice's *Vampire Chronicles*, even the bleak novels of Cormac McCarthy) all have something to do with Gothic. At the same time, they have very little in common, formally speaking,

with something like Ann Radcliffe's *The Italian*. Being exposed to and challenged by these new texts has led us to talk more about the Gothic in ways that also apply to them, and consequently less about the Gothic in ways that do not.

It's useful in this circumstance to consider genre theorist John Frow's dichotomy of "kind" and "mode," which articulates two different definitions of genre. In Frow's model, "kind" is probably closer to what I mean here by genre—a collection marked by formal similarity, by a resemblance of hard structural design. Modes, on the other hand, "start their life as genres but over time take on a more general force which is detached from particular structural embodiments" (Frow 65). In the case of Gothic fiction, it may be what Frow would call the Gothic "mode" that has endured outside the Gothic period: "exhausted genres such as the Gothic romance," he writes, "may survive in their modal form—quite spectacularly so in the case of the gothic mode, which passes through early-Victorian stage melodrama into the stories of Edgar Allan Poe and the novels of Charles Dickens, and thence into the vampire novel, the detective novel [. . .] *film noir*, and the contemporary horror movie" (66). For Frow, conflating mode and kind under a single term leads to a misunderstanding of genre as too flexible for ideas of formal structure. Gothic fiction in particular has in this way taken on an undead quality, offering up the appearance of a genre that has transcended its natural lifespan, living on in the changing shapes of Gothic modality even as the "Gothic kind," the specific generic forms of Radcliffe and Lewis, lose momentum and "exhaust" themselves by the end of the Romantic era.

Within the extended family of Gothic modality, then, we see new formal genres flourish—the detective novel, the Tim Burton film, the *noir* comic—in which we have the emergence of Gothic tropes which had no real presence in Gothic literature. The "Gothic trope" of the mad scientist, though a descendant, perhaps, of the title character in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, has no other place in the Gothic canon—and even *Frankenstein*, first published in 1818 and revised in 1831, is often considered too late and unusual to share a formal kinship to Walpole, Reeve, and Radcliffe. Mary Ellen Snodgrass describes *Frankenstein* as "the world's first science fiction novel" (126), an idea pioneered in 1973 by SF author Brian Aldiss in *Billion Year Spree* (6).

By carrying this claim into her *Encyclopedia of Gothic Literature*, Snodgrass is effectively placing the text within two formal spheres at once. We might choose to read this placement in the shadow of Derrida's "The Law of Genre," in which he proposes that "[e]very text *participates* in one or several genres, there is no genreless text, there is always a genre and

genres, yet such participation never amounts to belonging" (230). Alternately, we might recognize *Frankenstein* not as a text of two formal kinds, but as one of the first permutations (or mutations) of Gothic form, a literary ark of sorts which carries the concerns of the Gothic mode forward into new form as the old form becomes, to use Frow's terminology, exhausted.

The vampire, I think, is another revisionist trope, a permutation of the Gothic mode—and in the vampire, the distinction between mode and kind is easily marked, because the vampire makes no appearance at all in the sphere of Gothic kind. The aptness of the "Gothic" descriptor to vampires is almost intuitively understood, even when the vampire has circumvented altogether[1] the English prose fiction of the Gothic period, appearing only peripherally to it, chiefly in Romantic poetry. It is useful to ask why, in these circumstances, a connection exists between vampires and Gothic modality, and also to ask what circumstances finally prompted the vampire's leap to prose fiction at the end of the Romantic period. The answer I am most satisfied with at present is that this leap was made possible by a fracture or schism within the genre formerly called Gothic. This schism centered on terms of "probability," having to do with the fantastic, or more generally with what Todorov calls "the marvellous," and I believe it is responsible not only for the permutations of Gothic modalities mentioned by Frow (from "Dickensian Gothic" novels to horror movies and *film noir*), but also for the split between literature and what we tellingly call "genre fiction." Ultimately, the aesthetic concerns surrounding this schism in Gothic fiction lead not only to the development of "fantastic" literature as a distinct and modern genre, but also to the rise of its double-edged reputation as both a popular alternative and a debased cousin to "serious" literature. This split, centered on eighteenth-century notions of probability, gives us in fantasy a literature of the supernatural that is altogether different from the supernatural literature of ancient mythology or medieval romance, though tropes from both naturally migrate to the modern genre. Even the modern shape of "realist" literature, reflected always in the mirror of improbability, is shaped by the disputes of the Gothic Schism, which continues to drive the way that we as readers,

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[1] The only example which comes easily to mind is that of the Bleeding Nun in Lewis' *The Monk*; and her "vampiric" nature is as much the product of retroactive imagination as of her construction within the text. As a spirit or apparition she has as much in common, I think, with the ghost of Hamlet's father or the specters and apparitions of *Otranto* as with vampire, with whose increasingly standardized construction the Bleeding Nun doesn't perfectly match.

and particularly we as academics, think about literature of all kinds, of all modes.

Probability, the Supernatural, and the Split

In the eighteenth century, the critical reception of Gothic fiction was markedly unkind, in spite of its boundless commercial success. Owing much to the "traditions of sensibility and sentiment," these works were treated at best, in Jerome McGann's words, as "something of an embarrassment" (1).[2] At worst they were reviled for reasons too numerous to count, from immorality and sacrilege to their excessive, melodramatic dialogue. Most prominently, though, they were rejected for what amounted to a lack of realism, for representing textual "inner worlds" which failed to conform to the rules or reason of Nature. Walpole's second-edition preface to *The Castle of Otranto* describes these as "the rules of probability" (9), and refers also to their reverse, describing the ancient romances in contrast to the modern: "[i]n the former," he writes, "all was imagination and improbability: in the latter, nature is always intended to be, and sometimes has been, copied with success" (9). From this language of probability, widely used in the period (even by Walpole's detractors), comes the point on which most early dismissals of Gothic fiction hinged.

The eighteenth-century concern with probability comes from a variety of sources, but none more marked than the Augustan interest in classical aesthetics. In *Gothic Documents: A Sourcebook*, E.J. Clery and Robert Miles find that

Horace's *Ars Poetica* was by far the most frequent resort of opponents of Gothic fiction and drama. In particular, the phrase "[*quodcunque ostendis mihi sic,] incredulus odi*" (from line 188), "What I cannot for a moment believe, I cannot for a moment behold with interest or anxiety" in Samuel Johnson's paraphrase,[3] echoes and re-echoes as a motto for the assaults of anti-Gothic criticism; the point being that probability, literary decorum, is the vital condition for the ethical usefulness of literature. (173)

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[2] McGann's comment, from *The Poetics of Sensibility*, primarily concerns the modern relationship between sentimental literature and what he calls "high culture." I would venture to say that the contemporary disdain to which he refers, and the historical disdain to which I have applied his terminology, are facets of the same aesthetic discourse and critical reception, which have passed down to the present day in the same manner in parallel to the descending modes of genre-fiction it critiques.

[3] I have always preferred William Boscawen's verse translation, "Such Scenes we ne'er admit as true, / And, disbelieving, hate to view" (503).

It should be clear from the content of *Otranto*—the giant falling helmet, the prophecy and curse, a walking skeleton—that Walpole's definition of "probability" is different from that of his detractors. He is less concerned here with the fundamentally unnatural aspects of his tale, and more concerned with the manners and behavior of characters placed within it: distinctly unnatural situations are permissible to him as long as his characters "think, speak and act," in his words, "as it might be supposed mere men and women would do in extraordinary positions" (Walpole 9-10). A crushing death by helmet hardly constitutes "natural causes" and is in no danger of being called a "credible situation" in the Horatian sense. Instead, the only things that are "natural" here are Walpole's depictions of character, which, at least in the case of the nobility, are emotionally sophisticated, even though they need not be beneath the narrative sledgehammer of *Otranto*'s plot.

Ian Watt's *The Rise of the Novel* describes the emergence of psychological realism as a both a new invention and a crucial feature of eighteenth-century fiction, and from this period onward it remains a crucial feature of all literature, including the fantastic. It is this realism of character, rather than true novelistic probability, for which Walpole aims, and on which his own definition of "probability" seems to rest. But this specific aspect of realism was not enough to satisfy his critics, who largely found not that his characters were too insincere or stylized,[4] but rather that the situations in which their depth exhibited itself remained patently ridiculous ones. An early review of *Otranto*'s anonymous first edition finds that

> The publication of any work, at this time, in England, composed of such rotten materials, is a phenomenon we cannot account for.—We shall not affront our reader's understanding with a description of the several monstrosities of this story; but, excepting those absurdities, the characters

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[4] The exception to this rule is "the deportment of the domestics" (Walpole 10), not only in *Otranto* itself but in many of its descendants and imitators. The stock depictions of naïve and superstitious servants, especially alongside the sophisticated psychological depictions of the ruling family, were so pronounced even to eighteenth-century readers that Walpole, at least, felt compelled to address the matter in his second-edition preface. His defense here, as elsewhere, is that "[t]hat great master of Nature, Shakespeare, was the model I copied" (10-11), depending on the growing infallibility of the nation's Bard to justify the almost Aristotelian divide between his characters of "high" and "low" type. Typically, writers who followed Walpole's example did not consciously address the issue, which has contributed in large part to an understanding of Gothic fiction of the period as a largely bourgeois genre.

are well marked, and the narrative kept up with surprising spirit and propriety. (*Literary Annals* 18)

The dismissal of the fantastic here as "absurdities" is a trend that continues, eventually making the leap from reviews to literary criticism on a wider scale. A piece from 1800 "On the Absurdities of the Modern Stage" survives to paint an equally unflattering portrait of the Gothic dramatists:

> Happy shall I be[. . .]if I can but dissolve the spell, and convince my readers, that the fairy tales; the Cock Lane Ghost;[5] *Mother Bunch's* romances; or even the mighty magician of *Udolpho, Aladin [sic]* and the *Wonderful Lamp,* or the *Castle Spectre,* are very well in the nursery, will please children, {when the *coral*[6] will not,} but are not to be endured by men of sense and judgment, or who have ceased to think or act *like* children. Cannot these inspired writers, 'these fickle pensioners of Morpheus' train,' cannot they let the dead be at peace? (Academicus 204)

This opinion was a common one even at the height of Gothic literary production; it continued to attract adherents as the genre waned and became with increasing frequency a target of satire. Popular literature has not since been able to completely "live down" the notion that stories of the supernatural[7] are in some way inherently juvenile: the transition by the

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[5] The Cock Lane Ghost mentioned here, popularly also called Scratching Fanny, is a major subject of E.J. Clery's *The Rise of Supernatural Fiction*, which is probably the best source for more information on the apparition's history.

[6] "Coral" here probably means a teething toy or pacifier: the word was still in use metonymically for infants' toys well into the 1800s, even after coral began to be replaced by ivory and mother-of-pearl. Interestingly enough, coral itself had a centuries-long history of use in baby soothers because of a belief that it warded off evil spirits and stopped the flow of blood (Lindon 5). I strongly suspect the author had this old geomantic meaning in mind in his ironic aside, particularly given that the banishment of spirits and excessive blood from the British stage are the main objectives of his argument.

[7] Many writers on the supernatural (most notably Todorov, in his *Introduction à la Littérature Fantastique*, and his inheritors) distinguish between categories such as the supernatural, the fantastic, the marvellous, and the uncanny. Of Todorov's definitions, I am closest to the "fantastic marvellous" when I am discussing those texts that are genuinely supernatural: here textual events cannot be explained without altering the internal "laws of reality" from those that exist outside the text. However, on occasion throughout the chapter, I use "supernatural" fairly loosely as a blanket term for these things—especially since Gothic writing is full of seemingly unreal situations, which do not always fall predictably into Todorov's categories. Readers familiar with Todorov's "fantastic marvellous" and working in

twentieth century of supernatural (and once genuinely horrific) apparitions into faux-terror icons such as Count von Count or Casper the Friendly Ghost, coupled with the commercial success (especially in North America) of Hallowe'en as a children's holiday, is in some ways a direct descendant of the attitudes outlined here.

This "de-fanging" of the supernatural is partially the result of a much wider shift toward secular modernity, an effect of our radically changing attitudes and beliefs concerning supernatural forces. Even so, the claim that *The Castle Spectre*, a work[8] by Matthew "Monk" Lewis, is "very well in the nursery" and "will please children" is a surprisingly tame dismissal of the same writer who, in Thomas Mathias' famous words, "has neither scrupled nor blushed [. . .]to thrust upon the nation the most open and unqualified blasphemy against the very code and volume of our religion" (190). The dismissal of the supernatural as juvenile nonsense appears elsewhere in critiques of the Gothic, and remains a strange bedfellow to dismissals of the supernatural as sacrilegious, dangerous or morally subversive.

Undoubtedly some Gothic writers had to contend with both of these critiques at once (as Lewis did). However, it is worth noting that Ann Radcliffe in particular, in spite of being perhaps the most prominent figurehead of "terror writing" in the 1790s, managed to avoid the worst anti-Gothic criticism. In part, I would like to credit this to her unique approach to the supernatural, especially as it relates to eighteenth-century notions of the rational rules of Nature, under whose auspice Radcliffe's "explained supernatural" is consistently contrived to operate.

The term "explained supernatural" obscures the fact that Radcliffe's specters are not really supernatural at all, at least not in the manner of Walpole's ancestral giant or Lewis' Bleeding Nun. Robert Miles writes that Radcliffe "situated her romances on the 'Gothic cusp' . . . she tried to effect a compromise through the explained supernatural" (132). The Gothic cusp, in effect, is very close to "the utmost verge of probability" (3) described by Clara Reeve in her preface to *The Old English Baron*: it is a discursive borderland of sorts between one kind of fiction, in which a fantastic reality is factually permissible, and another in which it is not to be entertained, except by suggestion in the notions or superstitions of its characters.

Radcliffe does find a narratively powerful space between these two poles, but for our purposes it would be a mistake to equate that space with

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such terms should be able to determine whether I am speaking of this specifically, or of the supernatural in a looser sense.

[8] That is, The Castle Spectre.

an absolutely precise fulcrum, a sort of Lagrangian point[9] which favors neither one side nor the other. Radcliffe's Gothic novels may straddle gulfs between the irrational and the enlightened, between the uncanny and the familiar, between the real and the numinous; but for Radcliffe, and for readers of Radcliffe's time, the fundamental question of whether the supernatural is admitted into the internal logic of a story must have an absolute answer—and invariably, with almost no exception,[10] Radcliffe has clearly chosen her side. It is the same side on which Jane Austen falls: when we say that Radcliffe makes greater *use* of the supernatural than Austen, we are really, more precisely, saying that Radcliffe merely makes more frequent, closer, and more powerfully direct allusion to it.

Matthew Lewis' *The Monk*, though it engages in the same sort of play with the same conventions, ultimately falls toward the opposite side of the divide: the supernatural is sometimes presented at face value, and sometimes debunked altogether. There is never a guarantee whether a seemingly "improbable" situation will unfold as genuine supernatural horror or be deflated as trickery. However, the appearance of the "real" Bleeding Nun guarantees that no matter how many "fake" bleeding nuns are exposed as mechanisms of disguise or elaborate narrative deceptions, the text itself is one in which we must accept that fantastic supernatural events can, and do, occur.

Even so, *The Monk*'s relationship to the nascent Gothic Schism is an interesting one, because it is in part a product of complex debate between superstition and credulity. The dangers of taking magic too seriously are present here, as they are in *The Italian*; but here they are complemented by the even greater dangers of not taking it seriously enough. Although Lewis and Radcliffe both play extensively with the conventions of the fantastic, then, they are divided on the relatively simple yes or no question of whether their work presents the fantastic as (internal) fact. The narrative demand for scientific or natural "probability" is deliberately ignored by Lewis, but answered and even satisfied by Radcliffe's concession to explain her specters and wailing ghosts rationally.

There is a degree of contrivance on my part, a sort of inexact critical shorthand, when I cast Lewis and Radcliffe as the two poles of the Gothic Schism; nevertheless, they are strong and well-known example texts which

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[9] From astrophysics: a Lagrangian point is the point of exactly equal gravity between two bodies (such as a planet and its satellite), where an object could remain in perfect equilibrium, without "falling" toward either body.

[10] The single (partial) exception is Radcliffe's *Gaston de Blondeville*, which was not published until after her death and has had neither the initial success nor the sustained impact of her other novels.

represent quite clearly the beginnings of the divide, based on the single question of whether or not the fantastic is consistent with the internal logic of the fiction. In Radcliffe's wake, and especially since 1820, this question has become increasingly more pronounced, and has driven writers in "the Gothic mode" apart in two directions. Key figures of nineteenth-century British fiction, from Jane Austen to Charles Dickens, demonstrate the vast reach of Radcliffe's influence—but her influence brings with it her own move back toward formal realism, toward a denial of the authentic supernatural. Conversely, a second class of writers emerges in the period, including a small number of "serious" novelists—Mary Shelley, for one – and a multitude of Grub Street hacks and penny-dreadful serialists like Thomas Prest and James Malcolm Rymer (both of whom have been credited as the author of the 1845-7 serial *Varney the Vampire*).

The connotations of describing these writers as a "second class" are clear, and perhaps prophetic: whether the fantastic takes the form of "supernature," of "super-science," or some other speculative form, nineteenth-century efforts that deliberately set themselves outside "the utmost verge of probability" have given rise to subfields which are seen in contrast to the preferred conventions of the realist novel. Just as Jerome McGann observed sentimental fiction to be "something of an embarrassment" (1) to the critical vogue of the 1960s and '70s, so too have science fiction, fantasy, and horror remained in a field of literature pejoratively termed "popular" as a means of distinguishing (and dismissing) it from the elevated company of the literary canon. The critical success and endurance of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* as a canonical work is the exception rather than the rule; even if Stoker's *Dracula* is afforded (however grudgingly) the same critical importance, the eight decades between them are a period in which supernatural prose fiction has offered nothing to the canon to rival the "realist Gothic" of Dickens and the Brontë sisters. Ghost stories and tales of the fantastic continue to proliferate; but the best of these are frequently confined to short fiction and seldom support a "proper" novel. In general, even today, supernatural fiction and its later permutations—fantasy, science fiction, other "speculative" genres—tend to favor the same two forms that they did in the mid-nineteenth century: short stories, still delivered primarily in the vehicles of genre-anthologies [11] or cheaply printed periodicals; [12] and sweeping "sagas," trilogies and quintets which span multiple short books,

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[11] For example, the *Year's Best SF* anthology published by HarperCollins, now in its fifteenth year.
[12] The popular pulp magazine *Amazing Stories* is a particularly well-known example.

often without a narrative endpoint,[13] a clear descendant of the Victorian pulp serial tradition.

To this day, the critical opinion that such works of "genre fiction" are somehow juvenile—that they "are very well in the nursery . . . but are not to be endured by men of sense and judgment" (Academicus 204)—has been surprisingly long-lived. In some cases, the shifting attitudes which link the fantastic to juvenilia have had powerful effects on the reception of texts: few eighteenth-century children's tales endure in popular memory like the story of Gulliver and the Lilliputians from the first book of Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. The purpose of this tale, and the reasons for reading it, have undergone a drastic change in the public mindset: once a figure of satire, Lemuel Gulliver is now re-mediated as a figure of escapist travel-fantasy. It may seem strange to imagine the suggestion, in 1800, that the author of *The Monk* was deemed fit for the nursery; but by the twenty-first century, this attitude toward the supernatural has allowed the author of *A Modest Proposal* to join him there as well.

As I have briefly mentioned, the changing attitudes toward the fantastic in literature, especially (but not exclusively) in Europe and North America, owe a great deal to the history of secularization and the rise of a largely secular modernity. The emergence of new narratives of secularization over the past decade, the most prominent of which is probably Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*, may provide a framework for the next step in understanding the origins and roots of the modern fantastic as something distinct from (or, at the very least, complementary to) its traditionally perceived roots in folklore and mythology. In this brief article I have had time, I hope, to define and explain the Gothic Schism in its barest terms; but to understand the reasons for this schism, to understand the complex mosaic of events which led to its development, will require a greater understanding of these narratives of secularization which are only now beginning to emerge, and a sense where, within these narratives, the

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13 The examples are numerous. J.R.R. Tolkien's epic *The Lord of the Rings*, owing to the prohibitive cost of single-volume printing, was published as a "trilogy" against his better judgment and seems to have accidentally set a popular standard for speculative-fiction sagas. Other "series" range from Rowling's *Harry Potter* series (seven) to R.A. Salvatore's *Drizzt* saga (twenty and climbing). George Lucas' *Star Wars* franchise has spawned more than 120 novels from 1977 to 2011, not counting young adult titles or other media such as graphic novels or even sequel films: the growing popularity of such massive "expanded universe" franchises is dismissed by many as a commercial triumph of quantity over artistic merit. On the other hand, such phenomena are interesting examples of collective/collaborative authorship, and prompt more than a few theoretical questions that literary criticism would do well to one day address.

development of literature may situate itself in relation to changing attitudes toward the supernatural.

These narratives of development, which have yet to be written, offer something different from the traditional genealogies of fantasy literature, which can place modern fantasy as a direct and largely uninflected inheritor of medieval romance, but can do little else. According to these systems, for instance, the Merlin of T. H. White is a direct linear descendant of the Merlin of Malory; we become aware from them that to understand our modern fantasy, we must understand its ancient roots—and in that much, traditional origin-stories of the modern fantastic have proven fruitful. What such genealogies cannot explain, however, is why, at the time of this writing, the majority of Canadian public libraries I have surveyed catalogue *The Sword in the Stone* as a "Teen" or "Juvenile" work, while *Le Morte D'Arthur*, even in modern translation, resides almost exclusively in adult literary fiction or folklore. If this system of classification makes intuitive sense to us, it is because we remain deeply and profoundly affected by the Gothic Schism, and by the eighteenth century literary notions of probability and realistic propriety which, in the shadow of influences we have only begun to chart, continue to exert a powerful and resonant influence over the ways we read, understand, and think about our literatures of the fantastic.

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THE FUTURE OF ART: PHENOMENAL VIRTUE IN PURGATORIO X & XII

GAELAN GILBERT

Introduction: Habitus and Natural Desire

Though they are rarely the focus of critical attention, the fantastic elements of Dante's *Commedia* are bizarre and memorable. *Inferno* is populated by centaurs, harpies, sirens, and giants, not to mention the beast Geryon, a casebook example of the recombinative imagination.[1] Yet fantastic events occur not only within but also around the *Commedia*. In Boccaccio's *Vita di Dante,* Dante's mother has a dream of her son becoming first a shepherd, then a peacock who climbs a laurel tree to eat its fruit. Later in the *Vita*, ladies in the street of Verona recognize Dante by interpreting his darkened countenance as evidence of his journey though

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[1] There is also a rather fantastic story relating to Dante's birth. In the Thirty-First Annual Report of the Dante Society published in 1912, in a subsection entitled "The Fantastic," Ralph Hayward Keniston notes that "to enhance the idea of Dante's superhuman powers and virtues one of the most natural methods was the use of the miraculous, the supernatural" (76). He provides translated portions of Boccaccio's fourteenth-century *Vita di Dante* as evidence, beginning with the portion where Dante's mother, "when pregnant, and not far removed from the time when she should be delivered, saw in a dream of what wondrous kind the fruit of her womb should be" (Vita 74; qtd. on 76). The dream involves Dante's birth under a laurel tree, his transformation into a shepherd who "strove with all his power to have of the leaves of that tree," and eventually "becom[ing] a peacock" (10). Keniston argues that Boccaccio had in mind an account of Virgil's nativity written by Suetonius that also involves a dream about the poet's birth beneath a laurel tree. Later commentators saw this similarity not as an indication of obviously fabricated allusion, but as a further verification of the dream, which makes sense given both Dante's literary-civic status as an *ex officis* poet laureate, as well as his bonds with Virgil in the *Commedia* itself. Here, as elsewhere in his Vita, Boccaccio styles Dante as not only inextricably linked to his poem, in the sense that Dante himself is read in light of what he has written, but also as a living site for the proliferation of fantastic events and interpretations.

the singeing flames of *Inferno.* In the *Commedia*'s earliest reception, fantasy and reality intertwine.

While my attention in this essay will be on specific instances where Dante's imagination is engaged by fantastic means, I hope to situate these means within the strong ethical framework of the *Commedia.* In specific, I shall read Dante's encounters with God's fantastic art in *Purgatorio* X and XII as instances of aesthetic exemplarity that assist in Dante's moral development. I will interpret the process of this development—Dante's penitent shedding of the seven vices and resultant acquisition of the virtues—within the paradigm of Thomist-Aristotelian ethics by drawing upon the term *habitus*, that dynamic pattern of non-identically repeated actions and dispositions that constitute a robust ethical *praxis*.

While the term *habitus* itself does not appear in the *Commedia,* Katharine Breen has recently noted its importance for Dante's treatment of vernacularity in *De Vulgari Eloquentia*. Echoing a long tradition of monastic study, Dante employs *habitus* to denote the manner of acquiring fluency in *grammatica*, or Latin, which one learns "per spatium temporis et studii assiduitatem" ('over a long period of time and through diligent study') (*DVE* 1.1). Drawing on its Aristotelian origins, Breen calls attention to the fusion of the grammatical and moral senses of *habitus*, noting that the scholastic internalization and application of written rules was thought to regulate the soul's passions. Dante employs verbs like "regulare" and "doctrinare" to speak of performing the *habitus* of Latin, characterizing the process as autarchic yet involving the external guidance of active inner capacities. In other words, by operating within the limits of received knowledge, a full-fledged *habitus* enables individuals to improvise and self-teach in light of new situations, whether parsing of difficult syntax or deliberating over practical choices. As both the path and goal of ethics, it is a resonant notion for a poet like Dante, who strives to enunciate his fantastic journey as a proleptic taste for readers of a post-mortem future community whose experience for each is dependent in part on present moral conduct.[2]

For Breen, part of Dante's project in *De Vulgari* is the establishment of a vernacular *habitus*, an *assuetudo* (or *consuetudo*) that would resist the unquestioned alignment of lay vernacularity with vice and clerical or monastic *Latinitas* with virtue. His accentuation of the benefits of the Florentine dialect indirectly offers a rationale for the possibility of active lay virtue. I further suggest that Dante's *Commedia,* especially *Purgatorio*,

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[2] In this sense, *habitus* is "a synonym for the internalized Christian virtue whose loss is recounted in Genesis, but which can be regained, at least in part, through systematic right living" (Breen 4).

presents itself as both an embodiment (in Dante) and a potential cause (in the reader) of such virtue, which the ascent of Mount Purgatory in particular exemplifies as a path of inborn desire and experiential approximation to the Good. And as Virgil's final words to Dante indicate (*Purg.* XXVII.139-142), this is a freely-willed movement, a development from embryo to adult, prompted and sustained through phenomenal—even fantastic—means. Each soul, with its phenomenal "corpo fittizio" ('fictional body' [3] ; *Purg.* XXVI.12), ascends Mount Purgatory by undertaking a series of practices uniquely designed to purge vices through reciprocal negation (*e.g. Purg.* XI.70-72). Unlike the *Inferno,* which constitutes an extension of the rejection of divine love, revealing such a rejection to be in its true nature an experience of unbearable loss, the purgatorial *habitus*, in contrast, finds conscious motivation to respond in acceptance of divine love through repentant desire (*Purg.* XIII.85-88; XVI.93). As Dante says to the reader in terms which evoke an economic, possibly Anselmian model of atonement,

> Non vo' però, lettor, che tu ti smaghi
> Di buon proponimento per udire
> Come Dio vuol che 'l debito si paghi.
> Non attender la forma de martìre:
> Pensa la succession; pensa ch'al peggio
> Oltre la gran sentenza non può ire. (*Purg.* X.106-11)

>   . . . But I would
> not have you, reader, be deflected from
> your good resolve by hearing from me now
> how God would have us pay the debt we owe.
> Don't dwell upon the form of punishment:
> consider what comes after that; at worst
> it cannot last beyond the final Judgment.

The shades' longing to be purged presupposes their recognition that nearness to God, far from being an entitlement, requires purification. Dante even fears Beatrice's smile turning him into ash. The shades must gain substance, must replenish the healthy form that vice has emaciated, if they are to bear the weight of glory. As their recognition expands into a pattern, a *habitus*, of freely-willed virtue, they are illumined, emancipated from bondage to the seven sins, beginning with the chief vice, pride, and

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[3] All translations of the *Commedia* are from Mandelbaum's editions; see bibliography.